



BSFL: Matthew 5:48

BY MICHAEL PRIEST

PERFECT

A Word Study



THE TRUTH of some Scripture passages seems to cut against the grain of conventional thinking. They seem to crash against human logic like waves against a seashore. Matthew 5:48 is one of those passages: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly

Father is perfect.”¹ How can that be? Surely Jesus was mistaken. Have we not always heard that “nobody is perfect?” Today when we say someone or something is perfect we mean the person or thing is without any flaws, defects, or shortcomings. We mean we cannot improve the person or thing because it is beyond the need of improvement. If that is what Jesus was demanding of His followers, then we will certainly miss the mark. After all, Paul stated clearly, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Obviously Jesus wasn’t calling His followers to a state of sinless perfection. If so He was contradicting His own clear teaching in other places within the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6:12 Jesus said we should pray, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” If we need forgiveness of sin and are encouraged to pray for such, then we cannot be sinlessly perfect.

What, then, are we to make of Jesus’ command?² Exploring the origin and meaning of the word “perfect” in Matthew 5:48 can help us understand what Jesus meant when He said, “be perfect.”

The English word “perfect” comes from the Greek word *teleios*, which, in biblical times, had a broad range of meaning. Outside of Scripture it spoke of sacrifices being whole and without blemish. It also spoke of something being complete in the sense that nothing that belonged to the thing was missing. People used

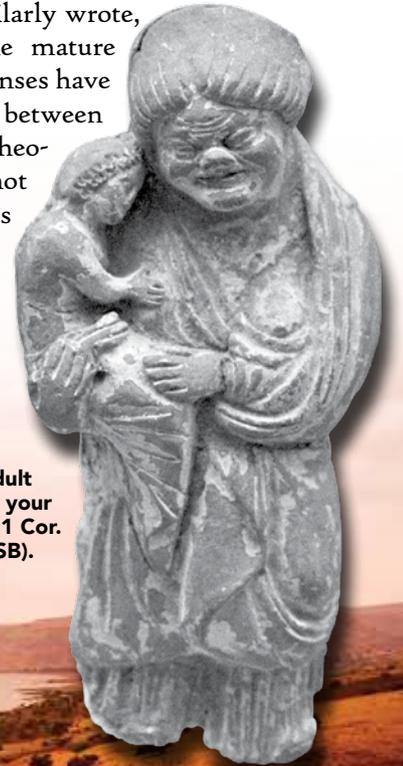
teleios to speak of someone who had completed stages of learning to the point that there were no more stages to complete. It spoke of a physician who had completed a course of study and lacked nothing by way of training or a thief who had reached the limit of professional ability to steal. The word also spoke of animals and humans that had reached biological maturity.³

Translators used *teleios* in the *Septuagint* to translate the Hebrew words that spoke of wholeness or reaching the purpose for which something or someone was created.⁴ This wholeness could refer to humans or animal sacrifices.

The New Testament writers used *teleios* 19 times and in a variety of ways. *Teleios* can speak of maturity.⁵ When explaining spiritual maturity to the Corinthian believers, Paul used *teleios*: “Brothers, don’t be childish in your thinking, but be infants in regard to evil and adult [*teleios*] in your thinking” (1 Cor. 14:20). The writer of Hebrews similarly wrote, “But solid food is for the mature [*teleios*]⁶—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil” (5:14). For theological reasons this does not seem to be how Jesus was using *teleios*. Jesus called His followers to be perfect as God is perfect. How does

Right: Terra-cotta figurine of a nurse holding an infant; dated to the Hellenistic period (332–37 B.C.). Paul instructed believers, “Brothers, don’t be childish

in your thinking, but be infants in regard to evil and adult [*teleios*] in your thinking” (1 Cor. 14:20, HCSB).



Looking at the Sea of Galilee from the Church of the Beatitudes. The lay of the land would have formed a natural amphitheater, allowing Jesus’ voice to be heard by the crowds of people.

a sinlessly perfect God need maturing in any way? Obviously, He does not.

Also, the New Testament used *teleios* to speak of wholeness or totality.⁶ In Matthew 19, a young man asked Jesus, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” (v. 16, NASB). Jesus told him to keep the commandments. In response the young man asked, “Which ones?” Jesus responded with six commands from Exodus 20 and Leviticus 19 that focused on relationships with other humans. The young man protested, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?” (v. 20, NASB). Jesus said, “If you wish to be complete [*teleios*], go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (v. 21, NASB). While the young man may have been morally upstanding and obedient to some of the Commandments, he was not totally (*teleios*) obedient to all of the Commandments; he loved possessions more than God, a clear violation of the First Commandment.

Teleios also spoke of completeness, in the sense that something or someone has reached the goal for which it was created or destined.⁷ When the person or thing has reached the goal, it is complete. James 1:4 says, “But

endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.” James’s point was when endurance has completed its work God’s children will have reached the goal (become *teleios*) He has designed for them.

With such a variety of meanings and usages, how then do we decide what Jesus meant when He said, “be perfect”? As is the case with many words in the New Testament, context is everything. Structurally, Matthew 5:48 could possibly serve as the conclusion to the extended passage beginning in verse 20. Or, structurally, verse 48 could serve as the conclusion to the shorter passage beginning in verse 43.⁸ Though both are possible, viewing verse 48 as the conclusion to the shorter passage that begins in verse 43 seems to be the better choice. Jesus began and ended the passage with the same thought: God’s children are to be like Him.⁹ This kind of bracketing is a literary device writers and speakers employ to set the parameters of a passage or thought. That being the case, then verse 48, contextually, relates to the central idea of the passage: “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (v. 44). The motivation Jesus gave for His followers to love their enemies is so they will

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Overlooking the ruins and excavation work at Tiberias. The schools at Tiberias had a dramatic impact on Judaism and

early Christianity. The *Mishnah*, the *Talmud*, and the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible were all put into their final forms at Tiberias.

Right: From Rome; dated to the 1st cent. A.D., a marble relief depicting a procession arriving at two altars (the one on the right is only partially visible). In honor of the god Mars, worshipers are sacrificing a pig, a sheep, and a bull. The Greek term *teleios* could refer to acceptable sacrifices. Mars, one of the primary Roman deities, was the god of war.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM (35/6/94)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/29/16)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ NEMEA MUSEUM (35/5/44)

Left: Discovered at Nemea, Greece, one of the host cities for the Panhellenic Games, a starting block for competitors in a race. The vertical hole was for a post that divided the lanes. The continuous groove was the toe line. The single foot toe hold on this end did not come into use until the Late Archaic Period. *Teleios* could refer to those who had completed their goal.

Left: A bronze diploma awarded to a soldier from the 5th cohort of Rome's Praetorian Guard; dated January 7, A.D. 246. *Teleios* could refer to someone who had completed a course of study.

love. That is the kind of love Christians are to express because we are children of our Father in heaven. **B**

be like God, whose love “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (v. 45). God expresses His love wholly, totally, completely on all, whether they are evil or good.

Jesus used the word “perfect,” then, to speak of wholeness, completeness, and totality. His followers are to express love completely (*teleios*) on all people, not just those who are lovable or reciprocate in love. They are to love their enemies and even pray for those who persecute them. That is *teleios* love. That is the Father’s kind of

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
2. Grammatically, the word “be” is future tense, but Jesus used it with imperatival force. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 133.
3. Gerhard Delling, “τέλειος” [*teleios*, perfect] in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 67-69.
4. Gerald L. Borchert, “Perfection and the Sermon,” *Review and Expositor* 89.2 (Spring 1992): 265.
5. Delling, 75-77.
6. *Ibid.*, 73-75.
7. “68.23 τέλειος” [*teleios*, perfect] in Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 658.
8. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, vol. 33a in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 135.
9. The beginning of verse 45 (“so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven”) and verse 48 both establish God, and His character, as the standard or goal toward which all followers of Christ should strive.

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